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ABSTRACT

Even if the great majority of our children are unaffected by television violence, and even if only a small fraction are negatively affected, we of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) recognize the need to determine how the negative effects can be alleviated. We are all in agreement that the resolution of this serious problem is the responsibility of the broadcasting industry--the alternative is government regulation of television content. Therefore, through the NAB's Code Authority, a program monitoring effort supported by the networks and by 402 television stations, we are now examining in detail the working of all of our Television Code's programing standards. A premise of broadcast self-regulation is that violence should be reasonably restrained as to degree and featured in contexts which justify its validity. In addition, the Television Code Authority and Review Board has been asked to undertake a study of the Report to the Surgeon General on Television and Social Behavior and to develop recommendations to the industry as to how the results of the Report may be implemented. (SH)

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STATEMENT BY
VINCENT T. WASILEWSKI, PRESIDENT
OF THE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BROADCASTERS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE
UNITED STATES SENATE
(Re Report of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior)
MARCH 23, 1972

Mr. Chairman, my name is Vincent T. Wasilewski. I am President of the National Association of Broadcasters, which is an association whose membership comprises a majority of the nation's radio and television stations and all networks.

I believe the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior should be complimented for an extensive study in a relatively short period of time. The massiveness of the Report and the carefully stated conclusions are testimony that the Committee sought to do both a thorough and responsible job.

The Report provides an assemblage of data and balanced perspective about a complicated and emotional subject about which little reliable information has hitherto been available. It appears that the crux of the Report to the Surgeon General is summed up in the following excerpts from pages 18-19 of the Summary:

> "First, there is evidence that any sequence by which viewing television violence causes aggressive behavior is most likely applicable only to some children who are predisposed in that direction . . . .

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"Second, there are suggestions in both sets of studies that the way children respond to violent film material is affected by the context in which it is presented. Such elements as parental explanations, the favorable or unfavorable outcome of the violence, and whether it is seen as fantasy or reality may make a difference. Generalizations about all violent content are likely to be misleading.

"Thus, the two sets of findings converge in three respects: a preliminary and tentative indication of a causal relation between viewing violence on television and aggressive behavior; an indication that any such causal relation operates only on some children (who are predisposed to be aggressive); and an indication that it operates only in some environmental contexts. Such tentative and limited conclusions are not very satisfying. They represent substantially more knowledge than we had two years ago, but they leave many questions unanswered. . . ."

Our own most recent research, just completed by Professor William Wells of the University of Chicago, also suggests that some children may, in some circumstances, be adversely affected by viewing television programs containing violence.

In any case, even if the great majority of our children are unaffected by television violence, and even if only a small fraction are negatively affected, we recognize the need to determine how the negative effects can be alleviated.

The broadcast industry's self-regulatory effort has directed special attention to responsible and realistic reflections of human conflict. In real life, such conflicts demonstrably exist and clearly

do often spill over into violence. A premise of broadcast self-regulation is that violence should be reasonably restrained as to degree and featured in contexts which justify its validity.

The selection and scheduling of programs and the handling of their content are determined by broadcasters themselves. The broadcasting networks additionally pursue through the NAB Code Authority -- which they, along with 402 television stations support financially -- a program liaison agreement involving a monitoring procedure. This activity comprises an on-air monitoring of selected programs to review handling of content.

Our increased monitoring efforts began three and one-half years ago; and, during that period, the personnel of the Code Authority's three offices in Los Angeles, New York and Washington have monitored a total of some 2,278 programs offered by the ABC, CBS and NBC networks. Formal monitoring reports filed with the Code Authority Director cover such matters as responsible treatment of crime and its techniques, violence and the consequences thereof, and retribution, as well as responsible treatments of racial considerations, morality, safety, prejudice and the like.

Two of the networks have a prior-screening arrangement with the Code Authority. Pre-screening is conducted when requested by either network or the Code Authority, and is confined primarily to new entries in the program schedule line-up.

In addition, during the period from October, 1968 through October 1970, the three television networks and the Code Authority jointly funded a consultative arrangement with Melvin S. Heller, M.D., and Samuel Polsky, Ph. D., from Temple University, Unit in Law and Psychiatry, Philadelphia. The purpose of this consultancy was to seek assistance from the psychiatric field with respect to the Code Authority's monitoring process.

The Code Authority's monitoring findings were appraised by the two specialists from Temple. Additionally, they helped not only to further codify and strengthen network editing criteria, but also pinpointed factors to be considered in the treatment of violence in programs directed to adults as well as those directed to children.

The work of Professors Heller and Polsky was presented in the March, 1971 issue of the Archives of General Psychiatry under the title "Television Violence, Guidelines for Evaluation." It presents an analysis of types, characteristics and presentation of violence on television; examines possible effects on the individual personality of the viewer, particularly the child; and offers suggestions for evaluating television violence on the basis of its emotional impact.

The recommendations of Professors Heller and Polsky direct network and Code Authority attention to the context in which valid reflections of violence are presented, especially with respect to the

consequences of violence and to the avoidance of dehumanizing of individuals. The recommendations also cover the modifying uses of fantasy and humor.

The findings of Drs. Heller and Polsky parallel those of earlier witnesses during the past two days, and point out possible avenues for further research and testing. They also make possible a continuing application and refinement of approaches that might be utilized by broadcast decision-makers in the area of content.

The creators and schedulers of programs have a particular responsibility to take a harder-than-ever look at the manner in which violence is presented. Violence which could reasonably be argued as excessive or gratuitous can and must be avoided.

We are all in agreement, I believe, that resolution of this serious problem is the responsibility of the broadcasting industry. The alternative is deep government regulation of television programming, and we regard this as dangerous and unwise. Therefore, we -- through the Code Authority -- are now examining in detail the wording of all of our Television Code's programming standards. Additionally, I have asked our Television Code Authority and Review Board, as a high priority matter, to undertake a detailed study of the Report to the Surgeon General in cooperation with the NAB Research Department. They are being instructed to draw upon such outside

counsel as they may require for the purposes of developing recommendations to the industry as to how the results of this Report may be implemented. I feel confident of total industry support.